

The heroes of the baths - looking at athletes in the Baths of Caracalla at Rome

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The best-known spectacles of the ancient Romans are the circus races and gladiatorial games, popular events throughout the ancient city's history. But from the end of the first century A.D. another public spectacle was also on offer: a full Greek-style festival, including athletic contests like those held at Olympia, as well as musical and chariot racing contests. Such a festival was initially introduced to Rome by the fun-loving emperor Nero in A.D. 60, and called the *Neronia*. Nero even took part personally in the singing contests (just as he had in Greece), but the festival itself failed to survive his downfall. Later, in A.D. 86, the emperor Domitian founded a second festival, named the Capitoline Games, in honour of the patron gods of Rome, the Capitoline triad of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva. This one was more successful, continuing to run until well into the fourth century. This festival attracted famous athletes and actors from all over the Mediterranean world and seems to have sparked off a desire to depict scenes of athletic competition in artistic media. From the early second century onwards we find a series of mosaics in both Rome and the nearby town of Ostia showing athletes competing or proudly brandishing their prizes for victory. Sometimes, as on a mosaic from an Inn in Ostia, they are named, and can be identified with particular athletes mentioned in inscriptions. Like the Pompeian graffiti which show sketches of gladiatorial fights, labelling the contestants with their names, this mosaic seems to record a particular contest between two well-known individuals. Other mosaics are less specific, showing more general scenes of a whole range of athletic activities. A mosaic from a large bath complex in Ostia shows a series of athletes around a table laden with prizes, engaged in activities like wrestling, throwing the discus and training with weights. One is even arguing with the umpire, his left hand raised in a time-honoured gesture of frustration we can see repeated down the centuries (as Wimbledon-watchers will recognise).

Athletics and Bathing

Scenes like these suggest public interest in watching athletic contests and a desire to record these events in the same way that chariot races or gladiatorial events were recorded. Yet most of these mosaics are found in bath complexes, and this may suggest yet another level of meaning to them. As well as evoking popular spectacles, do they also reflect the activities going on inside the baths themselves? For the opponents of Nero's festival in A.D. 60, whose arguments are given to us by the historian Tacitus, one of the dangers of introducing such Greek-style festivals was precisely the harmful effect that they might have on Roman morals: 'it only remains to strip and fight in boxing-gloves instead of joining the army'. Pliny the Younger, in his *Panegyric* (where he acclaims the new emperor, Trajan), suggests that this has already started to happen: 'our enthusiasm for weapons has passed from our hands to our eyes, and instead of a military veteran, a Greek trainer watches over our exercises'. Juvenal too, like a tabloid journalist deploring the present state of ancient Rome, laments the way in which 'your rustic Roman wears

dinner slippers and carries prizes of victory on his oiled neck'. Greek ways, including the customs of the gymnasium, were clearly perceived to be on the increase.

The traditional place for exercise in Rome had been the Campus Martius, an area associated with the training of citizens for warfare. However, as the Roman army became a permanent and professional body, the need for individuals to train for the army disappeared. At the same time, huge bath complexes were built by the emperors, incorporating areas for physical exercise, but also often areas designed for intellectual pursuits, such as libraries. Gradually, then, physical exercise became less associated with military training and instead became part of the leisurely activity of a trip to the Baths. Accounts by Latin authors show that before beginning one's bathing routine, it was usual to work up a sweat in the *palaestra* (or exercise ground) through activities such as walking, weight-lifting, light wrestling or a ball-game (a popular Roman pursuit).

Exercising in the Baths of Caracalla

The Baths of Caracalla in Rome were begun in A.D. 212 and dedicated by the emperor Caracalla himself in around 216. At the centre of the complex is the huge *frigidarium*, the cold room of the baths, with a swimming pool to the north and the circular *caldarium* (hot room) to the south. To east and west of the *frigidarium* lie two *palaestrae* (exercise areas), open to the air in the centre and surrounded by porticoes on three sides. Originally, in the semi-circular spaces between the central sections of the *palaestrae* and the *frigidarium*, there lay large multi-coloured mosaics. They were removed by the initial excavators and are now displayed in the Vatican Museums. Each shows a series of athletes. Some are shown full-length, brandishing their crowns and palms of victory with pride. For others, we see only their busts: brutal-looking figures, tanned by the hot sun with burly powerful shoulders. Around the edges lie the paraphernalia of the games: boxing gloves, the statues decorating the stadium, and the crowns worn by the presiding priests.

These athletes look like famous victors in the games, professional athletes mostly from the east of the empire, who travelled around the Mediterranean going from festival to festival. They suggest a delight in watching such contests among the Roman public. Yet their placement on the floor of the *palaestra* in a set of public baths also raises other connections. As the Roman bather passed from his own exercising in the *palaestra* into the cold room of the baths, he had to walk over these mosaics, literally stepping into the shoes of these victorious athletes. Through their presence in the area of the baths set aside for physical exercise, the mosaics encouraged the bather to identify himself with these athletic heroes, to compare his physique with theirs, and his own athletic contests, however minor, with those of the greatest festivals.

As the bather continued on into the baths, he encountered another athletic image, the statue of the god Hercules, weary after his final Labour collecting the apples of the Hesperides (fig 6). Hercules was the most athletic of all gods and heroes – cred-

ited with founding the Olympic games, and one of the patron gods of the gymnasium. This statue was placed between two columns on the way into the *frigidarium*, in exactly the same space that the bathers themselves passed through. By placing Hercules on the same level as the bathers, rather than removed from them in a niche on the wall, the decoration of the baths allows the bather to indulge in a very athletic kind of fantasy. Weary after exercising in the *palaestra*, as he passes from *palaestra* to *frigidarium*, the bather takes on the position of a victorious athlete, mingling even with the god Hercules himself. The images surrounding the bather added to his bathing experience, conjuring up a world of well-deserved rest after heroic toil and exercise, and implying an identification between the Roman bather and the athletic heroes of the festival circuit. They show both the success of Greek-style athletic festivals in Rome and the status victorious athletes could gain to become the heroes of the Roman Baths, eagerly imitated by the bathers of ancient Rome.

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